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ABSTRACT

This paper points out that students who earn a Ph.D. in English in a conventional literary curriculum are often totally ignorant of linguistics, rhetoric, and current research in the teaching and learning of composition. Yet such knowledge is invaluable for many reasons. Graduate students can become more accurate critics of their own writing, if they can make use of some of the tools of linguistic or rhetorical analysis. They can become more skillful literary critics and better teachers of both literature and writing. Furthermore, fully one-half of the teaching jobs currently available at the college level include the teaching of composition; therefore, at least one-half of the English doctoral students who plan to teach in four-year colleges and universities ought to have some formal instruction in composition. The paper lists the aims of a graduate concentration in composition, both for M.A. and Ph.D. candidates, and makes a few general suggestions for curriculum requirements for a minor or major in composition. Finally, the paper examines ways in which staffing can be provided for such programs and discusses other resources which the programs might draw on. (GW)

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Including a Concentration in Composition in the Traditional English Ph.D. Program

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The Tradition--and Its Problems

In the 60s, when the living was easy and jobs teaching college English were plentiful, many institutions responded to the desperate cry for teachers by streamlining their traditional doctoral programs. Instead of being required to have a comprehensive knowledge of British and American literature from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, accompanied by linguistics and/or history of the language, many Ph.D. candidates were responsible for two periods and a genre, or equivalents. "Get through and get out" was the motto; that they did, and were eagerly welcomed into the professorial ranks.

Now that we have reached the desperate 70s, many of the sleek curricula of the 60s still exist. It therefore remains possible for a graduate student to emerge from a conventional literary curriculum such as we offer at the University of New Mexico, Ph.D. in hand, totally innocent of rhetoric and stylistics, systems of grammar, linguistics, issues of bidialectalism and bilingualism, the history of the language, and current research in the teaching and learning of composition, among other subjects.

As a visitor of the composition classes of numerous TAs working on advanced degrees, and of some lecturers with Ph.D.s, I am continually surprised at their naivete about their own language. Many think there is only one "right" accent--their own, of course. Some do not know the IPA, and do not accurately interpret the standard dictionary pronounciation guides. They cannot teach sentence combining because they don't know the underlying grammatical rationale. Often they lack a knowledge of and sensitivity to stylistics; they can't convincingly explain why the passive, impersonal voice is less compelling than a rousing, active "I." Many writing teachers themselves hide behind the passive, fearful of being seen as a naked "I." I could multiply examples, which space limitations prohibit here, to demonstrate that although Ignorance is extensive, in the composition classroom it is not accompanied by Bliss.

The Rationale for a Concentration in Composition

But why suggest that graduate students spend their very limited and costly time studying subjects that may be remote both from the reasons they embarked on an advanced degree and their current interests? To what extent will a knowledge of theoretical and practical materials related to the history, analysis, study and teaching of the language, spoken and written, be of value

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to doctoral students now and in the forseeable future?

My own research, teaching, background in language, and work with doctoral students--both as a supervisor of their teaching and as a dissertation director--have convinced me that such knowledge is invaluable, for many reasons. As long as "publish or perish" remains the cardinal rule in our profession, new, old, and still more seasoned Ph.D.s can expect to devote a considerable portion of their professional time to writing. At some point in their careers (earlier for some, later for others) they cease being dependent on what teachers have to say about their papers and become independent critics of their own writing; this is the hallmark of good, professional writers.

Graduate students can become more accurate self-critics if they can use some of the tools of linguistic or rhetorical analysis to aid the diagnoses of their stylistic problems and to help correct them. To be sure, Donne and Austen and Faulkner and Orwell probably couldn't have formally labeled a transformation or a tagmeme, but they would have had sufficient sense of the sounds, structures, and rhythms of the language to be able to use intuitively what lesser stylists may have to practice more analytically.

"Writer's block" or "writing anxiety" that cause paralysis of the pen or ideas plague not only freshmen but graduate students, and ourselves and our colleagues as well. Is there anyone among us who has never looked with dismay at a pristine piece of paper waiting expectantly in the typewriter for the coy muse? Yet stylistic knowledge is stylistic power. If graduate students have learned enough about style and syntax to be able to analyze their difficulties, then they should be able to overcome them. This power to write well should give the fainthearted, the procrastinators the confidence to go ahead and write. The more easily they write, the more writing they are likely to complete--and to publish.

An enhanced, more analytic understanding of rhetoric, language, and the way the writing process works should enable graduate students to become more skillful literary critics; it should give them far more than twenty-seven ways of looking at their literary blackbirds. Wayne Booth's classic, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) is a brilliant example of the application of knowledge of rhetoric to a most lucid and compelling analysis of point of view and narrative techniques in fiction.[1]

As more knowledgeable critics and better writers, our graduate students should become better teachers of both literature and writing. For instance, if teachers understand the basic principles of multiple systems of grammar (such as structural, transformational, stratificational), they will be less likely to resort to the erroneous precepts of traditional grammar to explain the way language works. If teachers know the principles of descriptive linguistics that modern dictionary-makers use they will be better able to correct the students' view of dictionaries as prescriptive repositories of words that have descended, immutably, from God to Webster (and was that Daniel or Noah?) to their Webster's (are there any other?) dictionaries. If teachers are aware of the debate over the students' right to their own languages (be it Chicano, Blackamerican, or Standard English), then they will be more sensitive to its social and cultural as well as literary implications and to the dilemmas of bidialectal or bilingual speakers and writers. And so on.

Nevertheless, some proponents of the conventional graduate literary curriculum remain unconvinced of the utility of such knowledge. The argument goes, once the TAs have earned their doctorates, haven't they also earned freedom from the burden of all those papers week after week? The answer, surely no surprise to many of us, is that in many colleges and universities, upper level and graduate course enrollments are shrinking dramatically. At the same time, demands for literate students have greatly expanded the freshman composition and advanced writing courses, which often comprise two thirds of a department's enrollment. So even full professors are once again teaching composition.

An analysis of the February, 1977[2] MLA Job List verifies this. There are 308.5 (I'm counting full-time equivalents) positions listed at four-year colleges and universities, excluding those in the foreign languages. Most require doctorates. Of these, approximately one third (113.5) are in literature: 23 in British literature, 22 in American, 22 in comparative, 6 1/3 in drama, and so on. A fourth (74) are divided among linquistics (31), English education (22), and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (20.5).

And a hefty third (116) are in writing, about the same as last year. Eighteen are for creative writers. Ninety-eight, the largest single category, are in composition, including 44 full-time jobs teaching composition (mostly Freshman) exclusively, and 54 part-time jobs or components of full-time jobs in various other specialties. There are 13 full-time and 8 half-time positions for teaching remedial English and/or directing writing laboratories. There are 4.5 directorships of composition available, an equal number of positions in business and technical writing, and a smattering of partial jobs in grammar, history of the language, semantics, and bilingual education. One half (145) of all jobs listed include some component of composition.

The implications of these proportions are clear. If one-half of the available teaching jobs include composition, then at least one half of our doctoral students who plan to teach in four-year colleges and universities ought to have some formal instruction in content areas pertinent to this discipline. It is not sufficient, nowadays, for a Pope specialist or a Woodsworthian to append a line to a job application, saying, with a mixture of innocence and desperation, "I've also taught freshman composition for three years as a T.A. and am therefore an expert in the subject and fully qualified to direct a Freshman English program." A person with no training in British or American literature except what he had picked up from freshman textbooks for three years would scarcely be considered for a full-time job teaching these subjects; the same rationale should apply to teachers of composition.

A number of graduate students, recognizing both the realities of the job situation and their own lack of preparation, have been asking for courses in language, in the teaching of reading, in how to evaluate writing and to do research in composition. They want opportunities to teach remedial courses, business English, technical writing.

Aims of a Graduate Concentration in Composition

To accommodate these requests, there are many directions that either a D.A. or a Ph.D. concentration in composition could take. Two possibilities are indicated by the D.A. for teachers of composition at Illinois State University, and Wayne State's research-oriented Ph.D. in the composition of expository prose, focusing on linguistics and cognitive psychology (scheduled to begin in 1978-79). Common aims, however, might include the following, which could serve M.A. as well as doctoral candidates. For both, the aims might be:

1) To acquaint the candidate with the fundamentals of rhetoric, stylistics, linguistics, and/or history of the language.

2) To furnish practical, intensively supervised training in the teaching of a variety of 100 and 200 level composition and literature courses, so that the candidate can develop competency in these areas. In addition to the basic freshman composition courses, the literature courses taught might range from the standard literature surveys to courses in communications, film or other media; women's, Black, or other ethnic literatures. To facilitate this, teaching assistantships would be mandatory for two to four years of the student's graduate work.

Aims for Ph.D. candidates, in addition to those above:

1) To provide an understanding of the topic areas, research methodology, and publications in the teaching and learning of composition, and an opportunity to contribute to these publications.

2) To enhance teaching competency in at least one other aspect of composition in addition to the areas taught in pursuit of the M.A., such as business or technical writing, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, or work in a writing laboratory (with or without videotape and/or computer-assisted instruction).

3) To enable the student to design, direct, interpret, and present in a format suitable for publication a significant research project in composition--in such areas as rhetoric, stylistics, linguistics, educational philosophy or methods, testing and evaluating writing competency. This might or might not be a dissertation.

Although many institutions that grant doctorates will not have either the theoretical commitment or the available personnel or money to launch a new, full-scale graduate program in composition, schools with diversified curricula already have many components of a program such as I propose. It would not be difficult to coordinate them to provide a graduate-level concentration in composition.

If TAs staff many courses, English departments are likely to provide some on-the-job-training for them with a course in the practical aspects of Teaching Composition, as well as, perhaps, another in Teaching Introductory Literature. Courses in Stylistics and Rhetoric (perhaps subdivided by cultures and literary periods) are returning to the English curriculum, after years in exile after World War II. History of the English Language,

Introduction to Linguistics, English Grammars, Grammatical Analysis, Syntax, and Communication Theory may be offered either by English or linguistics departments.

Linguistics and/or anthropology departments include other relevant courses, such as Survey of Multilingual Education, Language and Culture, Introduction to Comparative Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Linguistic Theory. Linguistics and/or Education departments may offer Language Acquisition, Language Testing, and Language Pedagogy. Education departments also provide instruction in Audiovisual Methods and Technology, Production and Use of Instructional Materials, Remedial Reading Problems and Teaching English as a Second Language. Psychology Departments offer Psychology of Language, Psycholinguistics, Conceptual Behavior, Cognitive Development, Semantics, Experimental Design, and Statistical Analysis.

If enough courses were available from such a smorgasbord, especially those listed above as English Department offerings, most English departments would need to add one or two new courses, at most: a 600-level course, Research in Composition, and possibly a 500-level Teaching Non-Traditional Composition Courses (such as writing for business, technology, or social sciences; new journalism; interviewing; autobiography; "Roots"; writing for publication; and so on).

Curriculum Requirements

Because requirements and students' needs in advanced degree programs vary so widely from school to school, I will make only a few general suggestions. Twelve to fifteen hours of coursework would provide a minimum introduction to the topics essential for the education of college composition teachers, and some sense of the potential and methodology for research in these areas. How much more the student takes beyond these depends on whether s/he wishes to major in composition, or only to minor in it.

The minor is compatible with the conventional Master's or doctorate in literature; the major would be an alternative to the conventional curriculum in one or the other degree program.

The minimum requirements for persons electing a concentration in composition on either the Master's or doctoral level would include the following.

1) Either: One practical, three-hour course in teaching composition, taken concurrently with the student's first semester of college teaching. or: A three-hour practicum of supervised teaching, in close cooperation with a faculty mentor assigned to the student throughout his first semester of teaching composition, unless rotating mentors seemed preferable. The student and mentor, who would be teaching the same courses, would meet at weekly intervals to confer about assignments; ways of teaching particular rhetorical topics, works of literature, or other subjects; classroom management; grading criteria and standards. They could occasionally exchange and mark each other's papers At times, they could

visit (and perhaps teach) each other's classes. The faculty member would serve as a source of information and professional perspective, as a troubleshooter, and as a friend. Ideally, this relacionship would extend beyond the mandatory semester.

2) A course in rhetoric and/or stylistics. 3 hours.

3) Introduction to linguistics or History of the English Language. 3 hours.

4) Another course from among the many options in English, linguistics, education, anthropology, or psychology. "Teaching Non-Traditional Composition Courses" is strongly recommended. 3 hours.

5) For doctoral students. Research in Composition: Issues, Methodology, Applications. 3 hours.

An extended, supervised research project, possibly (but not necessarily) a dissertation, would also be required of doctoral students, with the amount of credit proportionate to the scope, duration, and effort the project required.

Students who wished to major in composition on either the Master's or doctoral level would also take additional courses, preferably in related groups, so that their degree program would focus on particular areas, such as rhetoric and composition, linguistics and composition, communication and composition, and so on. Comprehensive examinations and other rites de pasage would have to be individually tailored to each student's program of study.

It is difficult to predict the enrollment in such a program, but one might expect it eventually to total one-half of the graduate enrollment if it approximated the proportion of anticipated full- or part-time composition jobs available after graduation. Like all proselytizers, fully convinced of the worthiness of my cause, I think that the first three courses I have proposed under requirements for a concentration in composition should be required of all graduate students in English who expect to teach, whether or not they major or minor in composition. These courses are crucial, because they are minimum requisites for a competent performance as a teacher.

Staffing and Other Resources

If a linguist, rhetorician, and someone knowledgable in pedagogy and research in composition are currently available either in the English department or anywhere in the university, no new faculty are needed to implement my proposal, unless the requirements produce an enormous (and perhaps welcome) increase in graduate enrollment.

Faculty members supervising student teaching or student research projects might gain released time for these activities--perhaps a reduction of one course for every x number of students sponsored. As an incentive to encourage faculty cooperation, this number might be cumulative over several semesters.

Presumably, research facilities--hardware, software, and library materials--would already be available on campus, having been ordered by the departments which use them.

Some grant money might also be available to develop new programs. Additional journals would have to be purchased, such a Research in the Teaching of English, Journal of English Teaching Techniques, The English Record, and Freshman English Resource News--partly for their content, partly to encourage students to submit articles to them. It would be necessary to stock all the NCTE book-length publications, such as Ideas for English 101 (ed. Ohmann and Coley), The Teaching of Technical Writing (ed. Cunningham and Estrin), and Sexism and Language (ed. Nilsen, et al); and other relevant books, such as Richard Ohmann's English in America. A Radical View of the Profession and J. Mitchell Morse's The Irrelevant English Teacher.

However, a library of resources in composition can thrive on publishers' sample textbooks--from English, education, psychology. A graduate student researcher in remedial reading at the University of New Mexico acquired 164 books on the subject in one semester--just for the asking. So the overall cost of publications would be small. However, they would need a home-perhaps shelves in the freshman English office--and someone, the freshman secretary, perhaps, to keep track of them.

Someone in the English Department will have to take care of the necessary administrative details--publicizing the program, scheduling courses, advising students on their curriculum, matching mentors and students, recommending supervisors of student research (including him-or herself), acting as a consultant on resources and research projects. These duties will fall in the bailiwick of the Director of Composition, if there is one; if not, they might be shared among the Department Chairman, Director of Graduate Studies, and Director of Freshman English. Although they may increase the administrators' burdens, they are not likely to expand the administrative budget.

Conclusion

In many conventional graduate programs in literature, the absence of required courses in linguistics, rhetoric, and composition methods and research forces new teachers of composition to rediscover fire and the wheel for themselves every semester. This is a time-consuming process, full of trial, error, and frustration. Yet it could be eliminated if students chose (or were required) to minor in composition if they--realistically--expected to teach it after graduation.

By drawing on existing faculty, curricula, and other resources from English, linguistics, anthropology, education, and psychology, such a program can attain great flexibility and diversity with minimum additional cost to the institution.

The knowledge that such a program can impart can help graduate students to become better writers, critics, and teachers of literature and writing. It can also enhance their ability to find employment in the area where it is most likely to be available--composition.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Other relevant volumes are: Seymour Chatman, ed., Literary Style: A Symposium (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); and Donald C. Freeman, ed., Linguistics and Literary Style (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970).

[2]Connoisseurs of this publication say that whereas the MLA Fall Lists are inflated by a certain amount of wishful thinking, the Spring Lists, adhering to budgetary realities, are more accurate.